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Popular Images of the American Small Town

David M. Hummon

PLACES, LIKE HEROES, have popular histories. For a few brief years, they capture the imagination of the American public, then recede into the taken-for-granted landscape of American society. In the 1950s commentators on the American scene gazed across an expanding metropolitan landscape. Seeing tract housing, station wagons, and organization men, they responded—most with horror, a few with pride—and contested the meaning of suburbs and suburban life. In the 1960s black protest, the war on poverty, and ghetto revolt shifted attention from the suburbs to the central city, and talk of suburban conformity gave way to cries of urban crisis. In the 1970s the urban Goliath still dominated public attention, but an unlikely David, the American small town, has emerged to do battle for the American imagination.

A recent *Reader's Digest* article, "The Comeback of the Small Town," typifies much of what is being written about the small town in the popular press. The author of this article suggests that American cities have lost their lure and that Americans are moving to small towns in increasing numbers. To support this contention, he draws on well-publicized census data that indicate nonmetropolitan areas are growing more rapidly than metropolitan areas for the first time in decades. Small-town America, it seems, is experiencing a revival, brought about by the return of urban Americans to their small-town homes.

To examine how contemporary Americans think and feel about small towns I began with a review of public opinion studies of residential preferences for city, suburb, town, and country. Then I examined how some metropolitan and small-town residents in four northern California communities view small towns. Americans, though often fond of small towns, express a variety of feelings about them. If some people are drawn to towns, others are repelled by them, some are ambivalent, others indifferent. The different ways that Americans feel about small towns can best be understood within the context of varied beliefs about the town—beliefs that are shaped by basic cultural images of the town.

Public opinion and the town

In recent years students of public opinion and policy have become increasingly interested in American attitudes toward places. These pollsters have typically queried Americans about their preferences for different types of places—asking them, for instance, what type of place they would live in if they could move anywhere they wished. These studies of public opinion provide four basic insights into the way Americans feel about small towns and about places more generally.

First, Americans, when given a choice of several categories of places to live, tend to choose the kind of place in which they presently live more than any other. Residents of small towns and rural areas, however, choose their respective places at a much higher rate than residents of more urban settings. For example, in their study for the United States Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Sara Mazie and Steve Rawlings found that nearly nine out of ten small-town and rural residents chose smaller communities, while four out of ten residents of large urban areas preferred to live in large cities.

Second, although many Americans prefer the type of place in which they live, many others would rather live in some other type. The Commission on Population Growth, for instance, reported that approximately half of the American populace would prefer to live in another kind of place than they currently do. Typically, those with wanderlust choose a smaller place. As a result, more Americans would like to live in small towns than presently do, although exactly how many more depends on how researchers and Americans define the town. For example, in 1970 the United States Census reported that 27 percent of Americans lived in rural areas, and 31 percent in nonmetropolitan America. In the same year a Gallup survey reported that 55 percent of Americans would prefer to live in a small town or on a farm—with 31 percent of all Americans choosing the town.

Third, although many Americans express a preference for small towns and rural areas, certain Americans are more apt to do so than others. As noted, small town and rural residents are particularly likely to do so. Former residents of smaller communities and rural areas are similarly inclined, irrespective of present residence. Additionally, some evidence from Mazie and Rawlings shows that white Americans prefer small places more than black Americans, and, also, that Americans who are less educated and less well-to-do choose small communities.

Finally, some survey evidence, although sketchy and somewhat contradictory, suggests that favorable sentiment for smaller communities has been increasing in recent years. Gallup reports that between 1966 and 1972 the proportion of Americans who would prefer to live in a small town or on a farm increased from 49 percent to 55 percent.

These survey findings, and the favorable sentiment for the town they seemingly express, generate various interpretations. Popular writers often see these polls as evidence for a superior quality of life in small-town America, despite considerable evidence of continuing economic, educational, medical, and other institutional problems in rural America. Some writers like Irving Kristol and Peirce

Lewis contend that favorable sentiment for the town is indicative of the persistence of rural values in highly urbanized America. Still others treat American sentiment for the town as symptomatic, not of the quality of small-town life or persisting rural values, but of underlying social conflicts in urban America. The most sophisticated of these interpretations, offered twenty years ago by Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman in *Small Town in Mass Society*, proposes that the sentimental orientation of Americans toward the town involves an idealization of the town—an idealization fueled by the strains of contemporary mass society. Small-town Americans, they argue, idealize the town to displace resentment against their personal and communal dependence on mass society; urban Americans who idealize the town do so as an expression of their frustrations with modern urban life. More often, interpretations in this vein offer simpler, though also underlying, motives. To Max Lerner, for instance, the idealization of the town represents a search for lost community. To other writers it expresses a pastoral wish for a simpler, better place and time.

Place sentiment, belief, and ideology

In response to such varied interpretations of sentiment for the town, I have been engaged in a sociological study of popular belief and sentiment about types of places—particularly small towns, cities, and suburbs. In this work I focus on the cultural and social patterning of views of place, specifically on the diverse meanings that places have for residents of cities, suburbs, and small towns. I identify the different popular imageries that Americans use to characterize town, city, and suburb, and clarify how these image-ries are culturally organized into simplified, favorable presentations of urban, suburban, and small-town life, and I also explore how individuals acquire differing sentimental stances toward places by adopting varied beliefs from disparate ideological and social contexts.

This study is based on qualitative analysis of interviews about place with residents of four communities in northern California: a central city, an upper-middle-class suburb, a working-class suburb, and a rural small town. The particular places chosen for comparative analysis were selected to reproduce broad demographic, economic, and social differences generally found between contemporary American cities, suburbs, and towns. To insure a rich and sensitive description of popular belief and sentiment about places, I conducted seventy-seven focused interviews, using both open- and closed-ended questions to elicit views of place. Respondents were selected randomly from household lists in two or more neighborhoods of each community.

The town and its perspective

No small town is exactly like any other; each has its own flavor, intimacy, and set of values. Nor can one point to any single factor that makes people return to small towns in ever great numbers. But from those people I talked to, one feeling emerged more frequently than any other: a sense that small towns had been able to preserve a way of life that Americans had come to cherish.

—Reader's Digest

Residents of Valley Town, a rural community of 8,000, prefer to live in a small town or in the rural countryside,

like residents of most small towns. Those who prefer other places typically want to live in even less urban settings—some select farms or ranches; others, the wilderness. When queried about where they would least like to live, most Valley Towners, without hesitation, specify the city.

Residents of Valley Town, more than residents of the three metropolitan communities, share a perspective on the nature of places in contemporary America. They do not, of course, hold identical views of town and city, nor does any particular individual express all the beliefs conveyed by this perspective. Yet, many beliefs are widely shared, and residents who express contrary opinions do so with an awareness that their views are atypical.

The general features of this perspective are easily summarized. Most beliefs about small towns are couched in a more or less explicit contrast to beliefs about cities. A visitor simply cannot talk to Valley Towners about small towns without eliciting contrasting images of the city. Beliefs about suburbs, suburban life, and suburbanites are not, by and large, part of the place perspective of Valley Towners. When directly asked about suburbs, most Valley Towners have little to say; most are vague. The perspective of the town draws heavily on small-town ideology and, as a result, is highly selective, strongly evaluative, and warmly affectionate.

The beliefs of the perspective are less easily summarized, but four images of the town emerge. First, Valley Towners depict small towns as *quiet and natural* places. Unlike cities, which are thought to be noisy and hectic, small towns have a peaceful ambience and an easy-going pace: "Oh, the attitude of the people, the country living, nobody's in a rush in a small town. And it's quiet. No hurry and go all the time. In cities there's too much traffic for the way I was raised. I can work fast if I have to, but I like to take it easy. Being raised in a country town—going into the city—it's too fast. You live a year in a day and I don't like that." Valley Towners characterize small towns as natural in scale and landscape—unlike cities, which are too large, crowded, and artificial. "I lived in San Francisco and Los Angeles when I was in the navy, and all that did is just cure me. I don't want no big city. I wanted out from the time I got in. It seems like you're surrounded by the city. I'm not claustrophobic or anything, but it seems like you can't escape from it. To me, being raised in a place where you can look over the back of your house and see the mountains and everything, just seeing more buildings, was, you know. . . . I don't like crowded places, I guess—that's what it amounts to."

Second, Valley Towners describe small towns as places of *lively sociability*. This sociability is depicted through the neighborliness of town life, a feature of town life believed to be a product of the town's friendly ambience: "Well, a small town, it just has a slow, friendly-type atmosphere. It don't take long to get acquainted with people. A small town seems to be friendlier and a little more carefree. When I lived in Valley City it took me four months to get acquainted with my neighbors, and I lived right in a housing tract, and they didn't have time for anything but themselves. Around here I didn't live here three days, and I got acquainted with one neighbor." The neighborliness of the town, moreover, is thought to go beyond casual acquaint-

ance to mutual concern: "In a small town people are more friendly. You have real neighbors who look out for each other and drop in on each other all the time. People are willing to help each other. In San Jose there was a neighbor I never even got to know. That's not living."

Valley Towners also describe the sociability of the town through the imagery of the town as a place "where everybody knows everybody." Often such characterizations are used to suggest that small towns are places where social relations are personal rather than impersonal: "Well, I love the town because I am acquainted with so many people, not really on a social scale, but it's nice to walk down the street and see people that you went to school with, even though you don't any more say but 'hello.' You don't associate with them socially, but it's nice to know everyone and to know their relatives, and who they married, and their children, and sometimes even their grandchildren." The residents also characterize social relations as open rather than closed: "You take your little rural towns like Valley Town and Valley Dale. Everybody knows one another. But in suburbs and cities they each have their own little clique. Where in a small town everybody is invited—more or less—to join in, whether you know much or not." Moreover, although Valley Towners may note that the sociability of the town poses a minor threat to personal privacy—commenting that "everybody knows everybody's business"—most suggest that this threat is a "fair price" to pay in exchange for the friendly atmosphere, neighborly concern, and personal quality of town life.

Third, Valley Towners describe small towns as excellent places for *families*. Frequently, they propose that small towns are more "family oriented," arguing that families "stick together" more in small towns. Nearly all believe that small towns are excellent places for raising a family, unlike cities, which are "no place for children." Small towns, they maintain, are superior because they provide a better physical setting for the child's world: "In small towns you can have animals for your kids, things for them to do, like riding bicycles, going to parks, and picnics, as opposed to walking down the pavement to the corner and walking back to the other corner. Of course, if you had a lot of time you could probably make something for them to do in a city or escape from the city and take a weekend up in the mountains." Small towns are also excellent for raising children, Valley Towners believe, because their friendly atmosphere and social scale make it possible to know, and to control, a child's world: "You have more children from different types of homes in the cities. You have a cross section that's all thrown together. Children from all walks of life are thrown together and maybe one child picks up traits from another because he gets away with it. In small communities you're more aware of what's going on so you can tell your child, 'I don't want you going with this or that child.' In a larger place, you don't know whether he's been in trouble or not."

Fourth, Valley Towners describe small towns as *safe* places, but they often add that they are not as safe as they used to be. Cities, they note, with their "crowded conditions," their "transient populations," their "excessive permissiveness," and their "frustrating style of life," generate so much crime that they are "not safe to live in." For some,

like the woman who moved to Valley Town after living in a metropolitan area, the safety of the small town is a particularly valuable characteristic: "There's no traffic congestion in small towns and the crime's low. You're more free—not afraid to walk downtown. If you live in a city, you don't feel safe. We used to go to San Francisco when we lived in the Bay Area to see the light opera, but not anymore. You can't even walk down the street. The more heavily populated, the worse it gets, and the people change." For other Valley Towners, the safety of the town is a more taken-for-granted feature of town life: "In cities there's too much riffraff. You have to protect your back all the time. I feel pretty safe in a small town and strictly safe in the wilderness. There's crime in a small town, but it's penny ante stuff. Only a few murders once every year or two. In small towns, people control their own. If people are friendly, honest, you shouldn't have any crime. And in a small town people are concerned."

Finally, two areas of small-town life generate considerable comment and disagreement: work and play. Although some Valley Towners suggest that small towns provide good economic and recreational opportunities, others emphasize the limitations of the town. Socially, these interpretations are not sharply divided, but younger, newer, and middle-class residents are more often critical of limited options. Those who emphasize the opportunities of small-town life for work and play focus on the possibilities of small-town growth and the advantages of outdoor recreation, while minimizing the distance from urban jobs and entertainment. Those who are more critical of the town sometimes admit, often with reluctance, the advantages of urban life for jobs and recreation: "Cities are very hectic, and city people are kind of rude, I think. There's just a lot of noise and confusion, a lot of traffic, a lot of smog. The only good thing about cities is work. There's a lot of jobs, you know. Like if you were looking for work, naturally you would be better off in someplace like San Francisco than in Valley Town, because you'd have a better chance for getting a job."

Metropolitan views of the country town

Ignorance, intolerance, and persecution were the hallmarks of that idyllic setting, and I have learned from talking to others living in similar environments that it is the norm for almost all small communities. Flying back to San Francisco at the end of the year was like coming back to Jerusalem. Now I know why people fled the farms when the cities rose.

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

Slightly more than two out of three contemporary Americans live in central cities and their surrounding suburbs—not in the many Valley Towns that dot the American countryside. These metropolitan Americans do not, in any simple sense, share a perspective on the rural small town. Rather, when talking with these people I encountered a series of views, each with an emotional stance and a set of images.

Metropolitan Americans differ in the places they refer to as small towns. Most small-town residents and many metropolitan residents use the term "small town" to designate relatively small rural communities, numbering in the

thousands. Some metropolitan residents, however, call considerably larger places "small towns"—places like Eugene, Oregon (82,000), and Champaign, Illinois (62,000). Similarly, metropolitan residents may call smaller, suburban communities "small towns." As James Zuiches and Glenn Fuguitt note in another context, such "suburban small towns" make American preferences in public opinion studies appear more prurient than they actually are. This ambiguity in identifying small towns also indicates the extent to which the country town is becoming peripheral to the experience and perception of many metropolitan Americans.

What, then, are the different ways that residents of the metropolitan San Francisco Bay Area feel about country towns, and what do they believe such towns are like? First, some metropolitan Americans I spoke with—more often suburbanites—clearly want to live in a small country town. For these people, the town is typically a *paradise lost*. All have spent their childhood in small towns or the rural countryside; most have continuing family ties to a rural community; many continue to identify with the country town, noting some estrangement from their current situation: "Well, if I had my druthers, I'd be a small-town, country, or farm person. There isn't a lot of difference. They're all one kind: rural. I feel more comfortable there. I'm in my environment."

These reluctant urbanites describe the small town in a manner similar to current residents of the town. One man, for instance, now a resident of the San Francisco metropolitan area for thirty years, suggests: "A small town is where you become known and where you know a good percentage of the people who live in that town—and they know you. So it isn't like a city where the only place you are known is one little neighborhood. And the people are more friendly. Maybe that's because they don't have this fear that maybe he's going to come over and rip me off or steal something from me, 'cause I've known him and his family for years."

When asked where he would most like to live, this man first responded, "Bayside, the Bay Area, let's put it that way. Not San Francisco." After further thought, he continued: "Well, yes, I know where I'd live if I could—in a place up in the mountains. But I can't because my job's here. There you're back to nature, and you don't have so much hustle and bustle, and people take it easier. They don't have that nervous strain of go, go, go, go, and this and that. They're more relaxed with life. But it's like wishing on a star."

In contrast, some people in the San Francisco metropolitan area select the country town as the place they would least like to live. Typically identifying themselves as city people, these urbanites express a mixture of pity, bewilderment, and hostility toward the small town.

In their descriptions of the town these critics draw upon three negative images of town life. They characterize the town first as *provincial*. They argue small towns are "cut off" from contemporary American life, particularly from the cultural and recreational opportunities of urban life: "Small towns tend to be provincial, closed-minded, lacking in availability—of a selection of material wants, of diverse cultural activities, and of opportunities for growth in relation to the finer things of life. How's a kid from a small town in Iowa going to learn to enjoy a good French

restaurant or the symphony?" Small towns are also thought to be provincial because "they're behind the times": "I'm not accustomed to a small town. It was culture shock to move to that type of place, that's what it was. I couldn't believe it. The women were still running around with Mamie Eisenhower hairdos. Incredible!"

Critics of the town describe it as excessively *traditional*. Citing politics, they charge that small towns are not only conservative, but too conservative: "Small-town people are mostly conservative. They're out of touch. Not out of touch, I shouldn't say that, but I think they are a little out of touch with the whole society. And I don't think you'll get your political reformers from small towns. You're more likely to get your extremists and conservatives, your right-wingers, from small towns." The traditionalism of the town is also attributed to the social character of town people, who are described as less creative, less open, less interested in "getting ahead": "I had a friend in the army. He came from a small town in Oklahoma. He couldn't read nor write. He said, 'My old man didn't have to read and write. Why should I have to read and write? He's doing all right.' In a small town if your father was a farmer, they expect your kids to be farmers. In other words, if it was good enough for your father, it's . . . My father was a teamster. It was never good enough for me, and he never tried to hold me back."

Critics of the town characterize it as *personally oppressive*. This is often conveyed through an attack on the sociability of the town. "Small-town life," critics argue, "is like living in a goldfish bowl." And the sociability of the town is symptomatic, not of friendliness and concern, but of boredom and pettiness: "Small-town people are too god-damn neighborly! I told you I don't like all my neighbors over when I come home. I don't mind lending people things, but the cups of coffee—dum, de dum, de dum. It isn't the monetary thing 'cause they always return it. But it's just an excuse to get into your house. They check to see how things are. They're too petty for me. And they're only interested in their own little world. They aren't interested in the world as itself." The oppressiveness of the town is also described as an assault on personal autonomy and individuality. This may be characterized as intolerance. "Small towns are purgatory to me. I almost invited the breakup of my marriage to get out of a small town. The main thing is the red-neck people. They're narrow-minded, very judgmental. If you're a bit different, you're strange to them. It's just mainly the people." This oppressiveness may also be portrayed as conformity: "I get the impression that small towns are really dull and that I would be bored stiff. There would be this tightening by the community around me—in my subconscious—about what I could do, how I could dress, and I think that would take effect, as well as being bored."

The majority of metropolitan people with whom I spoke view the town as neither ideal nor horrific. A few have little sense of what a country town might be like. Like the following lifelong resident of large cities, they feel so marginal to the town that they insist they have little to say about towns: "I can't really say about small towns 'cause I haven't lived in a small town. You know, [laughs] about all I can say is from passing through or spending a bit of a summer. I really don't know much about small towns. I'm

sorry, but my only real contrast is from one city to another. I've been a completely urbanized person. You know, [laughs] if an earthquake came or a nuclear war or something, and we survived, I couldn't live on a farm. I'm just urbanized. All I can say about a small town is just pure guesswork."

Most often metropolitan Americans describe the town through a mixture of beliefs, juxtaposing images of small-town ambience and sociability to those of small-town conservatism: "I haven't lived in a small town, but I can speculate. I would think there would be advantages and disadvantages. It would depend on what you like, and so much of what you like depends on what you've experienced before. I would say there's probably a slower pace of life. Probably you'd develop different types of interests. I think small towns don't have some community things. That's the way I picture it. I think of it as maybe families being closer and the community being closer. Everybody knows everyone, which can be a problem for your privacy. And I would think, probably, in my mind, that small-town people are generally more conservative and have a narrower perspective." The collage of images they assemble is more often complimentary than critical, yet it is often infused with ambivalence: "I've given it a lot of thought, wondering whether I would ever want to move to a small town. I really have mixed emotions. On the one hand, I think, 'Gee, that would be really nice. It's quiet, it's peaceful, you get to know all the people of the town,' which sounds good to me. But on the other hand, I've got a feeling that if I lived there for a year I'd probably get bored. Like I say, I really have mixed emotions about it."

The variety of images

Popular sentiment about small towns displays variety and complexity. Some contemporary Americans are small-town people at heart; some loathe the town; others have mixed feelings; and still others are unresponsive to its charms and failings.

The varied feelings Americans express about the town must be understood within the context of varied beliefs about places. Differences in sentiment for the town can also be interpreted in terms of the varied experiences and interests of contemporary Americans. Yet what most distinguishes people who like small towns from those who dislike them is not experience or interest, nor a keen perception of the "real nature" of small towns. Rather, critics and defenders of the town differ in the way they think about small towns—more precisely, in the cultural images they use to interpret small towns and to structure their feelings for the town. Consequently, differences in feeling arise from differences in meaning.

For defenders of the small town they are ideal places—natural, quiet, friendly, neighborly, safe, good for families and children. The towns represent a simpler world—immediate, orderly, personal, and comprehensible. They are a haven free from the dirt, frustrations, and violence of cities, and they offer a community rich in sociability and neighborly concern. For critics of the town, they are provincial, overly traditional, and personally oppressive. Separated from the metropolitan locus of American life, lacking modernity in values and vision, small towns are also seen as a place, not of community, but of social constraint. □

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